

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Issue Fact Sheet

The Issue: Camping and beach use

Background: National Wildlife Refuges are national treasures for wildlife and people. The National Wildlife System Improvement Act of 1997 declared that six wildlife-dependent uses, when compatible, are priority public uses of the Refuge system and should receive special consideration in management and planning. These “Big Six” priority public uses are: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, interpretation and environmental education.

For many years following the establishment of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge in 1924, most camping was associated with hunting and fishing activities. More recently, traditional camping continues, but campers are doing much more speed boating, swimming, water-skiing, and social gatherings not related to the Big Six wildlife-dependent uses. Currently, during the waterfowl hunting seasons, camping must occur within view of the main channel and outside areas closed to hunting. Otherwise camping is restricted to a 14 day limit, camps cannot be unoccupied for more than 24 hours, and no littering is allowed.

Most camping, and many other water-related recreational activities occur on beaches next to the main channel border where sand has been placed by the US Army Corps of Engineers for maintenance dredging operations of the navigation channel. Prior to 1973, the Corps placed dredged spoil indiscriminately - after 1973 material has been placed in designated containment sites, some of which are periodically emptied and referred to as “bathtubs.” These sites are accessible to the main river channel and are popular mooring sites for houseboats and boaters who want to avoid the current, wave action and boat traffic in the main channel.

“Bathtubs” and beaches are attractive places for campers and day users involved in non-wildlife dependent activities. On weekends these sites can become attractive to large numbers of boaters often leading to a “party” atmosphere with attendant problems involving alcohol, littering, sanitation, noise disturbance and other conflicts between visitors.

Main Concerns:

1. Most uses associated with beaches and “bathtubs” are not wildlife-dependent recreation uses, and generally not allowed on most National Wildlife Refuges.
2. Many beach users would like to see the number of beaches increase. However, expansion of beaches on the Refuge may be at the expense of wildlife habitat.
3. Maintenance of “bathtubs” and beaches, litter control, signing, possible sanitation provisions, and law enforcement requires Refuge staff and funding.
4. Camping, whether on the main channel or in backwaters, can cause wildlife disturbance.